Focus yields 98 percent mission-capable rate

by Master Sgt. Scott Elliott
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5/1/2003 - **WASHINGTON** -- An “extra shot of adrenaline” let aircraft maintainers ensure that nearly every scheduled aircraft was available to fly when needed for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The chief of logistics for the combined forces air component commander said the performance by maintainers during OIF has been nothing less than superb.

“We’re downright amazed at the results from maintainers during this war,” said Col. Duane Jones.

“Statistics can be a dangerous thing, because you can make them tell you almost anything you want,” Jones said. “So, I want to be very specific about this -- of all the aircraft we prepared to fly on the 37,000 missions as part of the air tasking order, 98 percent were able to do their missions without a maintenance problem.”

Jones attributes the spike in sortie generation to an intense, wartime focus.

“Reason No. 1 is, we have priority on parts and things required make things go,” he said. “But we also have an incredible amount of focus. During peacetime ops, people do their level best, but there’s an extra shot of adrenaline when we’re doing this for real.”

The numbers reflect more than just routine “change the oil” and “inflate the tires” maintenance, Jones said. In fact, maintainers supporting OIF were required to do as much, if not more, phase maintenance from deployed locations than at home.

Phase inspections require maintainers to examine components of each aircraft after a determined number of flying hours, Jones said. Oftentimes, certain parts are preemptively replaced because experience has shown they tend to fail after a certain number of hours.

The colonel used the family car as an example.

“If it’s recommended to change the oil every 3,000 miles, but you only drive on Sundays, you won’t change the oil very often,” he said. “If, however, you commute 50 miles to and from work each day, you’ll need to change the oil more frequently.”

That is a big job, even during peacetime and under ideal home-station conditions, Jones said. But in a war zone, the smallest problems are compounded.

“What happens in a conflict is the utilization rates of aircraft increase,” he said. “Whereas, typically, you might have ‘X’ flying hours back home, you’ll find you’re flying two, three or four times that much during a contingency.

“When you increase the number of flight hours, you decrease the intervals between the major inspections,” he said.

Using the family car analogy again to illustrate the complexity of aircraft phase maintenance, Jones said maintainers have been tearing down and rebuilding the transmissions, and putting new rings and valves in the engine.

“We’ve been in the throes of bringing in additional technicians and specialized equipment to allow us to do more of these major inspections,” he said.

“There are a number of things we know we have to do when aircraft have higher flying hours, and we’re doing a great deal of that in the theater,” Jones said.